Robinson (John) of Norwich
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THE VILLAGE OPPRESS'D

A POEM.

INSCRIBED TO

Dr. GOLDSMITH.

LONDON:

Printed for J. ROBSON, Bookseller, at the Feathers in New Bond-Street.

M,DCC,LXXI.

[Price One Shilling.]

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A

P O E M.

By the Author of

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To Dr. GOLDSMITH.

SIR,

THE following poem being on a ſubject ſimilar to that on which you have lately diſtinguiſhed yourſelf, I do not heſitate to offer you this dedication. Had I any propenſity to flattery, the way to favour among the rich and powerful lies open; but I chuſe rather to neglect the opportunity, than to riſk (what I perhaps too highly prize) the liberty of ſpeaking my ſentiments freely.

I have ever been an enemy to luxury, and I cannot behold unmoved the haſty progreſs it is making in our days. The declaimers againſt it have generally drawn compariſons betwixt the preſent times, and the declining ages of the Roman empire; but I believe we are at preſent ſo far advanced, that without recurring to examples, the bare picture of the ſituation, to which luxury has already reduced us, is ſufficient to make us dread the conſequences of its further indulgence. Such a picture the readers of THE DESERTED VILLAGE are convinced you have well drawn. As, however, the plan of that poem prevented your following *Ruſtic Oppreſſion* through all its branches, I have endeavoured to illuſtrate ſome of theſe, with the ſame views as yourſelf, both of expo-

ſing luxury, and of convincing the rich, that as it is repugnant to benevolence, ſo likewiſe is it to their own intereſt, to harraſs and oppreſs the poor.

The preſent expenſive taſte, requiring increaſe of property, ſpurs us on to acquire it by every crooked kind of policy. An unneceſſary extenſion of commerce, which lays an additional burthen on both the rich and the poor, and tends to deſtroy the benefits which reſult from limited commerce, and the monopoly of farms, which enables individuals ſtill more to injure the community, are effects of this luxurious taſte; and no honeſt man, I think, will deem them ſubjects unworthy of attention.

I will only further premiſe, that however in the following poem, ſome circumſtances may ſeem to be exaggerated, I believe the diſpaſſionate reader will ſcarcely find a paſſage ſtretched beyond the bounds of reality.

I am, with much eſteem,

SIR,

Your humble Servant,

NORWICH. JOHN ROBINSON.

THE VILLAGE OPPRESS'D.

FAR from the noiſy, buſtling ſcenes of life,
Where Pride and Envy foſter ceaſeleſs ſtrife,
Where Faſhion, link'd with Folly hand in hand,
Bids countleſs vaſſals bow at her command,
How it delights 'midſt rural ſcenes to ſtray,
Where varying Beauty paints the devious way,
To ſaunter careleſs on the mountain's ſide,
And view the ſmiling landſcapes opening wide,
Or ſtretch'd upon the bank, where, gliding near,
The ſtream's ſoft murmurs greet the liſtening ear,

The bliſs of liſtleſs Indolence to know,
Which Care's *wiſe* votaries *prudently* forego,
Bartering for empty pomp, and needleſs wealth,
Smiling content, with innocence, and health.

Yet deem not hence that Care, a hateful gueſt,
Is too a ſtranger to the ruſtic's breaſt,
That while around him Nature wears a ſmile,
Theſe joys from him can anxious care beguile;
Alas! what pleaſures now can touch his ſoul,
His acts while power and frowning pride controul;
While changeful Fortune is no more his friend,
But dread diſaſters o'er his head impend?
With pitying tongue theſe oft have I deplor'd,
But weak the comfort pity could afford;
Theſe are my ſubject now; altho' in vain
Should candid Truth awake the indignant ſtrain,
Tho' Luxury ſhould its cenſure diſregard,
And ſtill from Labour wreſt its juſt reward.

In times which now even memory well can trace,
The harmleſs peaſants were a happy race;
The joyful farmer, with induſtrious hand,
Gather'd the plenteous produce of his land,
Nor envious griev'd to ſee the labourer ſhare,
(Meed of his pains) the bleſſings of the year;
Repin'd not meanly that the ſimple ſwain
His native freedom boldly could maintain,
Could rear his offspring, yet diſdain to wait,
For ſordid alms, before the rich man's gate;
Grudg'd not that leiſure which in ſports he ſpent,
But pleas'd beheld him chearful and content.

Now other fate attends. The ſwain no more
Haſtes to his labour jocund, as before;
Ruin and indigence the wretch ſurround,
Nor more the friend is in the maſter found;
That maſter, of the name, alas, bereft,
A prey to want and ignominy left,

Feels more ſeverely Fortune's adverſe ſtroke,
And drags more feebly Slavery's galling yoke,
Reduc'd, while hopeleſs of redreſs, to mourn
The power which Avarice from his hand has torn;
Avarice and Pride, which for one worthleſs Lord,
To ſwell the luxury of one ſplendid board,
Have farm to farm annex'd, and field to field,
While countleſs ſlaves enforc'd obedience yield.

Where now (the ruſtic's cares and labours paſt)
Where the rewards which ſtill were hoped at laſt?
Where the repoſe ſo oft he wiſh'd to ſhare?
How are his proſpects vaniſh'd into air!
In grey old age, his heart eſtrang'd from crime,
Vainly he hoped to chear the lingering time,
Beſide the winter's hearth his tales to tell,
Reaſoning from long experience paſſing well,
Or when the ſummer's ſcorching heats invade,
Peaceful to ſlumber in the friendly ſhade.

Cheriſh'd by Luxury, an uſeleſs train,
Who painful Induſtry's reward diſdain,
A ſervile race, who ſooth their maſter's pride,
Who fawn on wealth, and needy worth deride,
Pamper'd with eaſe, now fatten on the ſpoil
Of hungry wretches doom'd to ceaſeleſs toil.
Yet theſe can tyranniſe; and tho' for theſe,
His little fortunes wreck'd the ruſtic ſees,
Patient he ſuffers what even theſe enjoin,
Or but in ſecret ventures to repine.
Heavens! ſhould he utter one indignant word,
'Gainſt ſuch deputed mimics of their lord,
The grief-worn aſpect, nor enfeebling age,
Could ſave the helpleſs victim from their rage;
That lord can cloath them with deſpotic ſway,
And full revenge muſt wipe th' affront away.

Ere ſuch his hapleſs ſtate, the village youth,
Who free from flattery ſpeaks unſtudied truth,

Far from the public haunt was wont to ſteal,
To tell the liſtening maid his love-ſick tale;
His vows the fair with mutual vows repaid,
And ſchemes for bliſs in future days were laid.
But ſince by Power's tyrannic hand oppreſs'd,
Love gives no rapture to the penſive breaſt,
Wretched they dread the dangerous race to run,
And HYMEN's rites with prudent caution ſhun.

For boding Fancy pictures future harms,
And takes from wedded love its nobleſt charms;
Pictures the helpleſs infant doom'd to know,
Thro' life's whole round, unmitigated woe;
Beholds, in early years, a pining race,
(Miſery and famine low'ring in their face)
Laſh'd to their duty by unpitying hands,
To every duty thoughtleſs Pride commands,
While the fond parent ſtands unmurmuring near,
And ſighing wipes away the trickling tear.

Each ſmiling proſpect ſhaded by theſe fears,
Youth waſtes in barrenneſs the tedious years;
Save when, in one unguarded hour betray'd,
To fond intreaty yields ſome eaſy maid,
And, little heedful of her future ſhame,
Obtains, before the wife's, the mother's name;
Then the much-dreaded marriage bonds are tied,
The bridegroom joyleſs takes th' unhappy bride;
Thro' endleſs troubles lies their deſtin'd way,
And pain and grief the wretches' fault repay.

But ere old age or ſickneſs intervene,
May Heaven's indulgent mercy cloſe the ſcene!
Where, for that help they can no more ſupply,
From keen diſtreſs ſhall then the wretches fly?
Dwells in the dome, which on their ruin roſe,
Kind Hoſpitality, to ſooth their woes?
Or ſhall they yield, all hope of comfort loſt,
To vile dependance, at the public coſt?

That public coſt, which from his wealth alone,
He grudging pays, who robb'd them of their own;
While none have power, who might perchance befriend,
And none, when injur'd, dare their cauſe defend.

Now ceaſe the village ſports; to welcome MAY,
The ſwains oft frolick'd all the live-long day;
Deck'd in her beſt attire, each damſel ſtrove
To charm the favourite object of her love;
And all, with agile feats, and dance, and ſong,
And jeſt, and banter, wing'd their hours along.
Thus were they bleſt, and Wealth's ambitious train,
By them unheeded, might theſe joys diſdain,
Unenvied might to higher life reſort,
And bask amidſt the ſun-ſhine of a court,
At large thro' Pleaſure's ample field might range,
Where pall'd Deſire revives as objects change;
No peaſant envied theſe their pomp and ſhew,
Nor knew what bliſs they ſhar'd, nor wiſh'd to know,

Why then ſhould envious Affluence blaſt his mirth?
Why give to Diſcontent and Sorrow birth?
Ah, why ſhould * SOMERVILLE that mirth upbraid,
Sharpening his cenſure with the Muſe's aid?
Why peeviſhly aſſert with partial tongue,
From rural games his country's ruin ſprung?

The patriot dreads not theſe, but views with fear
The growth of Luxury in a higher ſphere;
For which proud Commerce ranſacks foreign ſhores,
And freights the veſſel with ſuperfluous ſtores;
Stores which the labours of the poor ſupply,
Who ſeem for this to live, for this to die;
Who ſee chagrin'd the good around them plac'd,
Their right by nature, which they ne'er ſhall taſte;
While Ocean's hardy ſons, their country's boaſt,
Vainly employ'd, are to their country loſt.

* See HOBBINOL, or the Rural Games.

Hence too the village finds its ills increaſe,
And wild diſorder ſoon ſucceeds to peace.
The cit, amaſſing ample ſums by trade,
Studious to ſhow his taſte by dull parade,
His Grace's rural ſeat to rival tries,
And bids at vaſt expence the *Villa* riſe;
Then leads the park, the grove, the garden wide,
Girding the peaſant cloſe on every ſide;
And brings to theſe his friends and ſervants down,
To ſpread the modiſh vices of the town.

Of theſe enough—Lo, where the village lord,
(Fear'd by the trembling poor, or half ador'd)
Feaſts and carouſes 'midſt his glad compeers,
While boaſtful clamour fills their deafen'd ears.
The ſportſman's joys inebriate they relate,
And dwell delighted on each cruel feat;
Again the ſcatter'd covey bring to view,
The circling traces of the hare renew,

The timorous deer let looſe for flight again,
And climb the ſteep, and ſcour along the plain.
Such are their *Sports*—the tribes for whom no ray
Of brightening ſcience e'er illum'd the way;
Who, wild, have only Nature's dictates known,
Start at the thought, and hunt for prey alone;
Yet as Barbarians are conſign'd to fame,
And held leaſt worthy of the human name.

To rank with theſe, how great were the diſgrace
To us, rare worthies of enlighten'd race,
Whoſe prying minds 'midſt varying Nature rove,
Pierce thro' the earth, and mount to heaven above:
Whoſe actions manly ſenſe and reaſon guide,
While taſte and elegance o'er all preſide.

Fond Self-conceit, how abſolute thy reign!
Truth may oppoſe, but ſhall oppoſe in vain;
Who like thyſelf can other's foibles find?
And who if ſearching for his own ſo blind?

Dowdies, at thy command, diſplay their charms,
To win the lover to their longing arms;
Dunces to learning's ſummit think they riſe;
Fools are tranſported that they grow ſo wiſe;
And we, who torture with tyrannic art,
We boaſt refinement and the feeling heart.

When *AUBURN's villagers no more enjoy'd
That peace which ſtern Oppreſſion had deſtroy'd,
Their long-lov'd home the penſive wretches fled,
And far 'mong unknown climes their journey ſped;
Bleſt but in this; where'er their lot was thrown,
No land could make them poorer than their own.
To others Fortune has even this denied;
Th' allotted round of life muſt each abide;
Their ear, perchance, ſome feeble tidings reach,
(The paſſing ſtranger's tales ſuch knowledge teach)

* *See* THE DESERTED VILLAGE.

Of realms where never commerce found its way,
Nor luxury yet has made mankind its prey,
Where faſhions no ſuperfluous care deviſe,
And trifling labour ev'ry want ſupplies;
But this can only fruitleſs wiſhes raiſe,
No proſpect opening hence for happier days.

Slaves to one maſter, to one ſpot confin'd,
Chearleſs deſpondence overſpreads their mind;
Thoſe Tasks ſo light, while eagerly they ſtrove,
By induſtry, their gratitude to prove,
How irkſome now, when all their labours tend
To glut a tyrant, where they need a friend.
One who, admiring gaudy pomp and ſtate,
Proud of his wealth, and friendſhip with the great,
His honeſt vaſſals never ſtoops to know,
Nor learns their little wants, nor heals their woe.

Hence with leſs ardour each his buſineſs plies,
And long th' appointed task unfiniſh'd lies.
Why ſhould they care to till th' extenſive field,
Or gladly teach the barren glebe to yield?
What tho' their diligence ſhould plenty bring;
For them no plenty is allow'd to ſpring;
To foreign climes that quickly is convey'd,
Aiding the ſchemes of luxury and trade.
There other buſy ſlaves, by BRITAIN fed,
Find not even leiſure to produce their bread;
Content to purchaſe what may juſt ſuffice,
And tug life's labouring oar to earn the price.

Is there perchance ſome one of humble mind,
To ſober life and induſtry inclin'd,
Whom changeful fortune has not yet bereft
Of a few roods his predeceſſors left,
Who, might he cultivate his ſmall eſtate
Uninjur'd, would not wiſh a happier fate;

For him what ſnares are laid by envious pride;
What fraudful means to work his ruin tried;
Endleſs affronts and inſults he ſuſtains,
Long as that freedom which he loves remains;
And if at length with conſtant feuds fatigued,
Dreading the foes againſt his quiet leagued,
He yields his patrimony, ſought ſo long,
And ranks ſome maſter's abject ſlaves among,
Mark'd as a foe, for ever is he known,
And for his merit is no favour ſhown.

Oh thou whoſe evils from this cauſe ariſe,
Learn to neglect them, and be truly wiſe;
Forget what once thou waſt, nor proudly ſtrive
To keep thy little ſplendour yet alive;
To fools leave faſhions; think that from thy hands,
Indulgent Nature trifling aid demands,
That homelieſt garments fence the wintry ſnows;
And how much leſs the need which ſummer knows;

Think that the ſimpleſt viands health maintain;
Nor waſte thy ſtrength a coſtlier kind to gain;
Beyond ſuperfluous profit prize thine eaſe;
Heaven meant not life ſhould torture thee, but pleaſe.

Such was the life our wiſe forefathers choſe,
Ere with politeneſs poverty aroſe;
Their wants were anſwer'd then with moderate care,
And half their days for pleaſure could they ſpare;
Then each was bleſt, and of his fortune proud,

To whom a numerous offspring Heaven allow'd.
Light was the burden; yet in modern days,
Which partial affluence varniſhes with praiſe,
Since taſte and art our manners have refin'd,
This boon were gladly even by wealth reſign'd.

Ye thoughtleſs race, on Induſtry who prey,
And lounge in baneful ſloth your hours away,
See Luxury's influence to yourſelves extends,
Nor barely with the ſuffering labourer ends;

Tempt not too far the flattering ſmiles of fate,
But check each vain purſuit, ere yet too late;
Stay not, neglecting ſober Reaſon's voice,
Till Ruin, near impending, leaves no choice;
Show Virtue ſtill remains, and while ye heal
Want's toilſome miſeries, ſhow yourſelves can feel.

FINIS.

THE VILLAGE ORPHANS. 25

Tempt not too far the fluttering flames of fate,
But check each vain pursuit, ere yet too late;
Say not, neglecting Nature's voice,
Till Rain, near impending, leaves no choice;
Show Vine full remains, and while ye heal
Wane's toilsome mileries, thew youthful era feel. 280

E L N I S.